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Dictators and drug dealers rejoice

By Richard W. Rahn

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If you were a member of the U.S. Congress and you wanted to hand a victory to Fidel Castro, his authoritarian buddy, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, and the international drug gangs, you could do so by voting to reject the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement. Improbable as it may seem, that is precisely what the Democrat leaders of Congress threaten to do.

First, a little background: As you probably recall, a decade ago Colombia was the home of major drug cartels who were the principal suppliers of illegal drugs in the U.S. Colombia was also the home of a left-wing guerrilla movement that ended up terrorizing much of the country, often in alliance with the violent drug gangs and some union leaders. In response, a number of right-wing paramilitaries formed and the country was, in effect, subject to a low-level civil war, about which the corrupt and ineffective government could do little.

In 1999, President Clinton and Congress started a massive aid effort to Colombia, called Plan Colombia, with the goal of getting rid of the drug lords and assisting the weakened forces of democracy in regaining control of the country. Under President Bush the effort continued, and over the last eight years Colombia has received about \$4.5 billion in military and financial aid.

Unlike many U.S. aid programs, this one has actually shown results. The major drug cartels have been destroyed, the left-wing guerrilla groups have been greatly weakened and most of the paramilitaries have been disarmed.

In addition to the U.S. aid, much of the success of the turnaround in Colombia is due to President Alvaro Uribe, who was first elected in 2002. Under his administration, the murder rate has been cut in half, democracy strengthened, much of the countryside has been reclaimed from the insurgents and drug dealers, travel is safe again, and the economy is now growing at a rapid rate (about 7 percent). The court system has been largely cleaned up and now functions at a high level, bringing convictions against those of both the left and right who engaged in murder and other human rights abuses. In addition, a number of politicians from across the political spectrum, including former allies of Mr. Uribe, are under indictment for corruption.

In many ways, the progress was more than could have reasonably been expected, but the congressional Democrats claim it is not enough. It is true the left-wing guerrillas have not been totally defeated, there is still too much drug production and too many union activists are still being murdered (though the numbers are far down). House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and some of her colleagues were downright rude to President Uribe during his trip to Washington last month, with their demands for more. Yet Mr. Uribe and his colleagues are under constant death threats for their efforts (Mr. Uribe's own father was assassinated by the left-wing terrorists).

How many of Mrs. Pelosi's tribe do you think would have taken the physical risks and have been as effective as Mr. Uribe? Regarding corruption in Mr. Uribe's own ranks, as far as I know, no Colombian member of parliament has been caught with \$90,000 of someone else's money in his freezer.

Pelosi Democrats have turned their backs on Democrats' traditional and proper support for free trade, due to their increased dependency on special interests. At an April 1967 conference in Punta del Este, Uruguay, President Lyndon Johnson (following up on President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress) called for the Latin American Common Market to be operational by 1985. Mr. Clinton pushed through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

If the Democrats reject the Colombian agreement, the pro-U.S. forces in Latin American will be dispirited because the message will be, "no matter how much we try to do what you want, it is never enough." Mr. Castro and Mr. Chavez will crow that again Uncle Sam is undependable, and their allies, both violent and nonviolent, in Colombia and elsewhere will be reinvigorated.

The simple fact is, Colombians, like people everywhere, produce and trade to live. The question for the Democrats in Congress is, "Are you going to expand markets for the industrial and agricultural goods that the U.S. produces by allowing the Colombians to sell us more oil, coffee, flowers, sugar, bananas and many other products, or are you going to push more Colombians into producing drugs for the U.S. market?"

The U.S. taxpayer has spent \$4.5 billion helping our friends in Colombia clean up and reform their country. Yet the congressional Democrats seem poised to throw this away in order to deny President Bush a success and to cater to some of their special interest groups, all for their own selfish political reasons.

The unambiguous results of the rejection of the trade agreement will be more poverty, more violence, more terror in Latin American, and more drugs in the United States. It is not an overstatement to say those who vote "no" are likely to have blood on their hands.

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